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## Enhancing critical thinking in foreign language learners

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### Abstract

Critical thinking refers to the individuals' ability to think and make correct decisions independently. Nowadays enhancing critical thinking in learners is considered one of the foreign language teachers' tasks due to its high position in foreign language classrooms. There are various factors affecting language learners' critical thinking skills. Among these factors is the assessment methods used. Therefore, through managing the ways of assessing language learners' ability, language teachers can help them develop critical thinking skills. In this presentation, some suggestions for language teachers to make sound choice of assessment methods and activities will be presented.

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*Key words:* critical thinking, foreign language teaching, foreign language learning, foreign language learners, assessment

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### 1. Introduction

Critical thinking has been recently introduced and gained a high position in foreign language teaching (FLT) settings so that nowadays enhancing critical thinking in learners is considered one of the foreign language teachers' tasks. Many different factors can affect learners' critical thinking skills. The types of assessment used in the classroom as well as at the end of the course are among these factors. This paper argues that through managing ways of assessment, language teachers can help learners develop critical thinking skills.

### 2. Critical thinking

Many different definitions have been proposed for critical thinking by various educators such as Lipman (1991); Norris and Ennis (1989); and Siegel (1988). However, there is not much difference among these definitions. As Elder and Paul (1994) state, critical thinking refers to the ability of individuals to take charge of their own thinking and develop appropriate criteria and standards for analyzing their own thinking. Moreover, as Maiorana (1992) maintains, critical thinking aims at achieving understanding, and evaluating different perspectives, and solving problems.

### **3. Critical thinking in language teaching**

The promotion of critical thinking into the FLT classrooms is of high significance for several reasons. Firstly, if language learners can take charge of their own thinking, they can monitor and evaluate their own ways of learning more successfully. Second, critical thinking expands the learning experience of the learners and makes the language more meaningful for them. Thirdly, critical thinking has a high degree of correlation with the learners' achievements (Rafi, n.d.). Different studies have confirmed the role of critical thinking in improving ESL writing ability (Rafi, n.d.); language proficiency (Liaw, 2007); and oral communication ability (Kusaka & Robertson, n.d.). The learners may become proficient language users if they have motivation and are taught the ways of displaying critical thinking in foreign language usage, which signifies that the learners must have reflection on their production of ideas, and they may critically support those ideas with logical details (Rafi, n.d.). Language development and thinking are closely related and the teaching of higher-order thinking skills should be an integral part of an L2 curriculum. Educators have emphasized the importance of developing higher-order thinking skills in foreign language classrooms (Chamot, 1995; Tarvin & Al-Arishi, 1991) and empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking skills along with the foreign language (Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Davidson, 1994, 1995).

In fact, language learners who have developed critical thinking skills are capable of doing activities of which other students may not be capable. Implied in the study by Mahyuddin et al (2004) is that language learners with critical thinking ability are capable of thinking critically and creatively in order to achieve the goals of the curriculum; capable of making decisions and solving problems; capable of using their thinking skills, and of understanding language or its contents; capable of treating thinking skills as lifelong learning; and finally intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually well-balanced.

However, in spite of the fact that there is little argument among theorists and educators about the importance of thinking skills in language development, in typical school settings, language learning and thinking skills are often treated as independent processes (Miraman & Tishman, 1988; Suhor, 1984). In other words, as Pica (2000) states, in the tradition of English language teaching methodology, the integration of language and thinking skills has been peripheral. It is argued (e.g. Kabilan, 2000) that even communicative language teaching, which emphasizes the use of language as a communication tool, does not really help students to become proficient in the target language. He suggests that for learners to be proficient in a language, they need to be able to think creatively and critically when using the target language. So, it is implied that even communicative approaches to language teaching do not develop critical thinking among learners.

Due to the advantages mentioned for enhancing critical thinking in language learners and also little practice in this regards in FLT settings, as Brown (2004) asserts, in an ideal academic language program, the objectives of the curriculum should go beyond linguistic factors to develop critical thinking among learners. In fact, the effectiveness of language teaching will depend upon what is being taught, in addition to language, which learners can consider as a purposeful and relevant extension of their horizons (Widdowson, 1990).

Language teachers are among practitioners who can greatly influence the type of learning by language learners. Therefore, one of their responsibilities is to help learners develop critical thinking abilities. Maybe even more than L1 teachers, L2 teachers have reasons to introduce their students to aspects of critical thinking (Davidson, 1998). As Lipman (2003) says, teachers are responsible for promoting critical thinking in the learners other than helping them to go from one educational level to the next. The responsibility of foreign language teachers is to help their learners acquire critical thinking skills while learning the language. As Mahyuddin et al (2004) assert there is plenty of room for improvement in incorporating the thinking skills into our curricula.

#### 4. Enhancing critical thinking through assessment

There is no doubt that the way of assessment in foreign language classrooms highly influences what and how the learners learn. This influence of testing on teaching and learning is referred to as washback effect. Alderson and Wall (1993, p. 115) state that “tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in the classroom.” In his trichotomy of backwash model, Hughes’s (1993) describes test effects in terms of “participants” such as teachers, students, administrators, materials writers, and publishers, “process” referring to those actions taken by participants to complete teaching and learning tasks and “product” referring to learning outcomes and the quality of learning. Hughes’ model implies that the quality of a test determines to a high degree the level and amount of washback (Pan, 2009).

Assessment practices mainly influence learning through affecting the objectives the learners set for themselves in learning the foreign language. In fact, in many cases the way of assessment is determinant of the objectives of the language learning program. If in a language teaching context, assessment focuses on linguistic competence of the learners, mastery of linguistic competence becomes the learners' objective, while in a context emphasizing communicative competence, learners do their best to become communicatively competent in the foreign language. In the same way, if the focus of assessment is on integrating language and thinking skills, the learners do their best to achieve this objective. In fact, when the purpose of teaching is understanding the process of assessment, in addition to evaluation, is a substantive contribution to learning. Assessment that fosters understanding needs to inform students and teachers about both what students currently understand and how to proceed with subsequent teaching and learning.

Here are presented a number of suggestions for enhancing critical thinking among language learners through assessment practices:

1. Use ongoing assessment rather than one-shot exams at the end of the semester. While one-shot exams require the test taker to have a limited amount of knowledge, mostly linguistic, ongoing assessment carried out during the course gives the teacher the opportunity to test a larger range of knowledge and skills, including critical thinking skills.
2. Use criterion-referenced (CR) testing rather than norm-referenced (NR) testing. NR testing encourages learners to attempt to be better than others without thinking about what they learn and how they use it. Moreover, CR testing welcomes the differences among learners and consequently, differences among learners lead to learners' learning from each other in a friendly non-competitive atmosphere. While the learners become more cooperatives than competitors, they become more concerned with understanding than with outcomes. As such the help each other in developing critical thinking skills.
3. Include activities in your assessment which encourage the learner to think about the major objectives of the course, including developing critical thinking skills. The type of activities used in assessing language learners determines the goals of learning. Those activities which can be carried out through simpler processes such as memorizing, substituting, etc. are not appropriate activities for enhancing critical thinking in language learners. Better activities for the purpose of promoting critical thinking skills are those which require the learners to think, cooperate, ask questions from themselves and others, etc. These activities also require the learners to the activities with the purposes of such activities.
4. Provide learners with feedback which gives learners understanding that thinking is an integral part of their learning experience. This integration of performance and feedback is exactly what students need as they work to develop their understanding of a particular topic or concept. Feedback needs to occur frequently, from the beginning of the unit to its conclusion, in conjunction with performances of understanding. Some occasions for feedback may be formal and planned; some may be more informal. Feedback also needs to provide students with information not only about how well they have carried out the activities but also how

they might improve them. Furthermore, it needs to inform learners of the teachers' planning of subsequent classes and activities. Another requirement of feedback is that it must come from a variety of perspectives: from students' reflection on their own work, from classmates reflecting on one another's work, and from the teacher. Model for students how to provide feedback that both tells them how well they are doing and gives them information about how they might do better.

5. Co-develop criteria for assessment. Even if you have a sense for what the criteria for a particular performance should be, try inviting learners to develop the criteria themselves by looking at models of similar performances. Help students to see how the criteria relate to the goals of the activities.

The points suggested here are just a few among many points which if taken into account can help language learners think critically. In fact, what is highly important is the teachers' understanding and having in mind that assessment is a key determinant of what is learnt in the language class and how it is learnt. In that case, the teachers can choose the most appropriate ways of language assessment with regard to the specific context of their own classroom.

## 5. Conclusion

Critical thinking needs to be enhanced among language learners due to its significance in developing effective language learning. So promoting critical thinking skills is considered one of the tasks' of language teachers. They can do this task through various ways, including using appropriate ways of assessment as assessment practices usually determine the learning objectives of the language learners.

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